



Minette:

Recollections
of a
Part-time Lady

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Recollections of a Part-time Lady

This book is based on many visits to Minette's flat. The words are Minette's. The text was edited by Steven Watson. The photographs from Minette's album are mostly by anonymous photographers, printed and re-worked by Ray Dobbins.

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Flower-Beneath-the-Foot Press
New York



Come in, boys. Don't mind the 2-watt bulbs. Your eyes will get used to it. I think it shows the flat off better, don't you? My friend Crazy Arthur says, "Minette, if your flat was a movie, it would be called 'Dust Be My Destiny.'" I used to say that I was more decorative than practical, but I can't really even say that anymore. Let's go into the front parlor. And I'll tell you about the queens.

Queens are not a new thing, honey. Impersonators have been around as long as there has been a theater. Until the Restoration in 1660, all female roles on the English stage were played by impersonators. Of course, I don't go back that far. My pictures of the queens go back to the turn of the century — they adorn my sheet music covers. It was a high point in American popular music, and I love playing those pieces here in this parlor, on that piano you see. Yesterday I washed the keys with milk so my fingers feel gorgeous making music. There on the music rack is Julian Eltinge, greatest of all.

Julian Eltinge was a huge vaudeville, movie and uptown Broadway star from about 1904 to 1930. Her vaudeville salary was second only to Eva Tanguay, and Pickford, America's Sweetheart, once played a supporting role to la Eltinge. She had everything, honey. A Julian Eltinge magazine, a Julian Eltinge cosmetics line, and the beautiful Eltinge Theater on 42nd Street with the Eltinge penthouse on top. It later became the Laff Movie, but in its day it was glamour.

Miss Eltinge had a high voice — not falsetto — and she conducted herself about the stage in the most genteel manner. Then, in the middle of the show, she would pull off her wig and flex her muscles and challenge any hecklers to a bout of fisticuffs in the alley. The publicity was that Miss Eltinge was straight, because I don't think the average person knew what "gay" was. A lot of fellows had a chance to fool around, but they didn't talk, see. And there was no common culture then, no boob tube, so people just knew their own circles.

Julian Eltinge retired around 1930 and made a comeback engagement in 1941 at the Copacabana. She died in the middle of the run.



FRIENDS


Successfully introduced by JULIAN ELTINGE



Second only to Miss Eltinge in fame was Karyl Normand, a Kieth's headliner who co-authored hit songs like "Nobody Lied When They said I Cried Over You," in 1922. My sister Tommy Bishop worked with her once, and said that she was a very high-minded lady. They worked together at the Frontenac in Detroit, a posh supperclub: Miss Norman was the big time. They had tables with cloths that went all the way to the floor. Tommy would sometimes save time by taking care of business under the table. And Miss Norman didn't approve of that. "Tommy, Tommy, you're a lovely thing, but you can't do that. This is not the Vieux Carre."

I'll get out my photograph album to remind me of the

SUPPOSE NOBODY CARED




Lyrics by
KARYL NORMAN
Music by
EDWIN J. WEBER

Song

*A Song by Karyl Norman
"The Classic American Style"*

JEROME H. REMICK & CO.
NEW YORK DETROIT

Nobody Lied



(When they said that
I Cried Over You)

Lyrics by
KARYL NORMAN
Music by
HYATT BERRY
Arranged by
EDWIN J. WEBER

Lyrics by
KARYL NORMAN
(The Classic American Style)

JEROME H. REMICK & CO.
NEW YORK DETROIT

stories. But first of all, have some tea, boys. This is one of my Mystery Teas, because I'm not quite sure what's in it, except that passionflower is the headliner and there's a little support from ginger and peppermint. It's tepid but it's wet, and have some other tea, too. This is a red-gold tea from Colombia. I call it my Strawberry Blonde. Teatime usually waits until sundown, but when it's time to look at the album, it's time for tea.

Most of my early pictures are gone, so I'll bring you up to dragtime days without much photographic accompaniment.

Backstage Youth

I was born Jacques Minette and my parents were French. "Minette" means many things: "pussycat," "pussy," or "suck me." It isn't too easy to translate, and it's not a word used in polite company I've heard, but I think it sounds gay. It's me, especially without the "Jacques." My mother painted landscapes and still lifes. My father was a commercial artist but he got arthritis in his hand and couldn't paint anymore. He went through the first world war, with all that dampness. It got to him later. First he had a nervous breakdown that went into shingles that became neuritis that became arthritis and finally a dropsical condition. So my father was sick for years, always going to anyone that claimed a cure. I went to work to help pay the bills.



This is a real woman, not a queen, my aunt. She was the house singer for a two-a-day burlesque. Elegant burlesque, with a supper matinee and a dinner matinee. She was the one that got me started in show business when I was three, partly to keep me out of trouble and out of her makeup kit. So I became a show business kid.

I never minded any of the problems of growing up as a show business kid. Everybody else worried about it and worried about me. People used to say, "Isn't that terrible, a small child in shows, with no parents to watch out for him?" I say: "Look, you got one mother; I got fifteen."

My aunt would help me with my acts. I did impressions and songs that were big at the time. I did Mae West with a cigarette holder and a Meri Widow hat, and Belle Baker doing "All of Me" and Ethel Waters doing "Am I Blue." Ethel Waters introduced it in a talky and I almost wore a hole in the record learning that — we had the heavy tone arms then.

I used to do impressions of Ruth Etting, Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, Kate Smith, and Maurice Chevalier, and I would have done the Boswell Sisters, but I only had one head. One of my favorite numbers was "Brother Can You Spare a Dime." They dressed me up in an outsized derby like Little K.O. from the Moon Mullins comic strip and put me on the runway with a little tin cup. I made extra money on that number.

Don't get me wrong — I wasn't pushed into this show business. I got into it myself. I would much rather work than go to school. To me, school was prison. I had a generation gap with all the kids that were my own age. I thought I was an adult trapped in a child's body. There were sort of meanie-like teachers and I was different from any of the other kids. I was a princess and they were just common kids. I didn't know I was a princess then. Fortunately, my first lover protected me and I could run well.

I quit show business when I was six, for one year. But nobody was working in the family, so I went back to work. I nearly got expelled from school. We had this little show at the end of the year. "We can't use him," the school said. "He's professional." They weren't so hip — they called me "him." But they let me anyway, even though I was a professional; when the piano player tried me out it was fine. But when I did "Frankie and Johnny" for the teachers they were shocked. I used to end up "Frankie and Johnny" by



saying, "Why don't you come up and see me sometime? I got etchings. On the ceiling." A Mae West routine. That's all I said, but oh it really upset them. For once my mother stood up for me. She said, "If you think that's filthy, you've got a dirty mind." Yeah.

I didn't really understand what it meant to say, "Why don't you come up and see me sometime?" I might have known it was sexual, but I didn't really know what "sexual" was.

When I was a kid, I used to think of myself as a little girl. When I was particularly feminine, my aunt would say, "D.D.G." That meant, "delicate, dainty girl." I saw impersonators, but I didn't know what they were.

I thought they were another type, like a soubrette or an ingenue. I just thought they were these extraordinary women. When my aunt would talk about a fairy, she would always say, "Oh, he's so artistic." So I thought fairies were these certain people who were born with genius, and when I saw someone acting swishy I thought he was a genius and a fairy. I always wondered why Franklyn Pangborn wasn't a star.

Going to school was bearable for me only because of Camillo, my first and most faithful lover. Sex at six has no climax, but plenty of experience. Camillo was valiant and protected me from plenty of gay knocks. Wonderful, sweet Camillo died young, and I blame myself for that.

It happened when we were teenagers, and all these people thought I was a fairy and I had to be careful because people wanted to seduce me. And they would tell me all these tall tales about gay people. "They can't hold their vegetables," they used to tell me. "Their bowels are loose, they can't hold anything in there." I never became a browning queen — for good reason — but all this scared me at the time. Right after this Camillo said to me that people were talking about us. I got scared and ran away from Camillo. And that was the last I saw of him. He was drinking and got killed in this automobile accident. It's not so traumatic now, but it was then.

And it turned out Camillo was right. I was one of those people. I was a fairy.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. For most of my childhood I had this double career — showbusiness and school. But I became more and more disenchanted with school and yearned to be a grade school dropout. The school felt the same way about me. The principal decided I was "too nervous," a code word for gay at that time. I was sent to a psychiatrist and this headshrinker was an amiable young woman. At the end of our meetings together she said to me that I would one day become a female impersonator. I didn't pay much attention at the time — I was far too elated with her decision that I didn't have to go to school anymore.



And then I got to be a teenager. And honey, it was a great help to me to be a teenager in show business. If I was a teenager in staid normal Boston culture, I would have committed suicide or gotten murdered. But I could always get away from the so-called "real world." I had all these campy, campy people around me. I knew only campy old people — and there were other old people who were not so campy. But show people were always campy, because, see, when I was growing up, show people were like drag queens. They used to have signs in rooming houses: NO SHOW PEOPLE. The whole spirit of showbusiness — at least the lesser type show people — was a camaraderie system: the customers were the marks and the show people were your buddies. This system has long been on the wane but the carnival people still hold onto it, very traditional with a carnie code of honor.

Show people were my family and I was always the baby, always the youngest, and then all of a sudden I was the oldest and it seemed to happen overnight.

When I was 14 they passed a law that said you had to be 16 to work public shows, so I quit vaudeville to go into clubs where I was a boy crooner. But I was never very comfortable working as a boy. After the first number, I would always undo the first button, because I felt choked by the collar. For a while I was too uncomfortable and thought about leaving show business to design dresses.

When I came back, it was in a dress. I was 16 and it caused a regular separation among my friends. Among my agents, see. I was working cheap-time because I was working drag, and they could have gotten more money from me in other ways. But I felt so liberated, finally, working in drag. To be me, to be feminine. It felt gorgeous.



Boston and Sailors

Most of these album pictures are from 1949 to 1954. It was fabulous showtime for queens. Lots of sailors during the Korean War, cheap booze, and lots of shows. Everything that was important, you know. A very campy time.

Scully Square in Boston was the center of things, like Times Square years ago, with clubs and theaters. I remember one club that was a redo of one of the burlesque theaters when it burned. It was a whole mass of bars, and they covered the place in a snake-like network, so wherever you were there was a bartender at your disposal. So you'd drink more. See, Boston had no cover — no minimum. And there was a tradition then of big spenders. People would come into a bar and buy everybody a drink. So liquor was cheap in these huge barny places that needed decoration for the last fifteen years. Dingy looking places, but lots of acts and cheap booze. It was a good showtime, and the common people supported nightclubs. It wasn't the Coconut Grove they went to, but clubs like the Rex and the Showtime.

I opened one night at the Showtime when the Navy had just gotten paid. I wasn't used to the Showtime and I got scared to death. The Showtime was like they were



all Marines, even though they were mostly sailors. I had to follow this real pig of an act, a real woman, a fat woman. "Peggy O'Day" was her name. Everything about Peggy O'Day was real pig-like. She couldn't sing and she was vulgar, but she wasn't funny. She was just dirty. As roaring drunk as the Navy was, they hated her. They threw beer bottles at her. And she cursed the Navy right back. So there it was: "bastards," and beer bottles and "sons of bitches" and worse stuff — Peggy O'Day knew them all. And I had to follow that.

The band tortured out this unrecognizable version of "International Rag" in the key of Z. But I belted it anyway and those boys were kind to me. Nevertheless, there were several free-for-alls between songs and I made that my last night at the Showtime.

In the clubs I mostly sang regular songs, but I also wrote lots of gay parody songs that I'd sing when I could get away with it. I'll sing you one called "Doodle Doo Doo." "Doodle Doo Doo" was a popular number in the twenties.

I know a belle who loves to raise hell
With doodle doo doo, doodle doo doo.
I know a dyke that says that she likes
Her dooddle doo doo, doodle doo doo.
She's his big brother, he's her little sister,
Disowned by their mother, but I'll tell you mister
Wherever they cruise, they know how to choose
Doodle doo dooddle doo doo.
One night they came home, but they weren't alone
'Twas doodle doo doo, doodle doo doo.
Their parents weren't wise when they rolled their
eyes
At doodle doo doo, dooddle doo doo.
Now mama is butch, her morals are scanty
Papa's turned too and he's an old auntie
The family's gone mad, they sure got it bad
'Bout doodle doo dooddle doo doo.





Here I am with the Navy at the College Inn. I still love seafood, seafood's still my favorite. There were a lot of inexperienced ones, and they'd say, "Oh, I've never done this before." But they did it so well. And they some of them would be more honest: "Oh, we do it with each other on the ship, but when we get to port we look for real queens." Nowadays, they're ashamed to wear their uniforms and I don't blame them.

These sailors in the picture were lovely boys too. I went with one and Dixie Gordon went with the other and the one on the end passed out. I had them take me to a nice restaurant. Nothing too much — I didn't want to break these boys — they were good for about \$20. They're probably old farts by now, but they were handsome young shieks at the time.

Dixie Gordon once brought two sailors home at once, to her boudoir. She left these two sailors to prepare in her bathroom, and when she came back they were going at each other. Dixie came running down the hall to me. "Oh, Minette, what am I going to do? They're doing it to each other." "Don't complain," I told her. "You already got the money." "But I was sort of in the mood," she said, "and they were such nice boys."



Dixie Gordon comes from Cincinatti and ran away from home to work as a stripper when she was fifteen.



The manager raped her, found out it wasn't real, and didn't care. And her father finally found out and came and pulled her off the stage. She did five years in the penitentiary for armed robbery during the last Depression. Miss Gordon said the first year in the cellblock was terrible, but after that she began to get privileges. She was the mistress of one of the top guards, and the other prisoners would wait on her, like a princess in prison. When they had a show, she would borrow the wardrobe of the warden's wife — they were the same size — and she'd look capital. In drag there was no one like Dixie Gordon. When she got out she lived in drag. So, honey, if you think I've got campy tales . . .

There was always a little heat from working at the College Inn because drag was against the law and the Navy banned the sailors from coming in toward the end, afraid they might get subverted. The sailors came anyway, without their uniforms.

And, as for the law against impersonating a woman, it was fun seeing how we could push it. Boston was a semi-drag city. We could wear women's blouses and makeup, but we had to wear trousers. I wore "patio pajamas," now known as "culottes." I wore French high-heeled shoes and said, "These are men's shoes from the time of Louis XIV." And if they looked in the encyclopedia there was something to back me up. I had a woman's blouse from the last Depression and I told them it was a man's shirt from the time of George Washington. Rene Lewis used to take the paper serviettes from restaurants and she made tits out of them. She had a special way with paper tits so that if the cops walked by she could crush them just like that.

When queens started coming into the clubs it wasn't as rough. Honey, gay life wasn't like Christopher Street. The queens then were like ladies, and if they didn't act like ladies they got called "faggots." See, that's why I object to being called a faggot. To me, the faggots were the lowest common denominator, the real scuffy ones, the tearoom types.

One of the best places was the Silver Dollar. Now the Silver Dollar was a little bit of everything. They had fairies, and prostitutes, and straight people, and lots of

sailors. It was called the longest bar in the world and it ran all the way from Washington Street back to Playland. On the stage they had a real woman that looked like a female impersonator, sort of a Margaret Dumont type of woman, with a campy name like Velma. She played the organ gorgeous, and it used to get real loud. We used to say, "You know, everyone thinks they're having such a good time at the Silver Dollar because the music's so loud they can never get lonely." That was the theory.



This is Murry Pickford and her Royal Canadian Doves. They were really white pigeons, but she

insisted you call them doves. "Doves," she said. Murry was a deaf and dumb queen and when they closed Boston down to all the queens, Murry went to the officials and said: "Drag is the only way I can make a living, you know. I'm deaf and dumb." So they gave her a special card from the liquor board that said she could work in drag, and Murry was the only queen in all of Beantown that could work in drag. She was born deaf and dumb so she talked funny and couldn't hear anything. But she could read lips like crazy. She used to read them in the mirror when we were in the dressing room, only it would come out backwards and she thought everyone was dishing her. If you said she was terrific, it would come out you were dishing her. I worked with her when I was a little kid and then much later on. She had a lot of mileage by this time and she was hard to work with, although she kept on working until she died a couple years ago.

Her act was that she used to dance to "Beautiful Lady" or anything else that the band would play in the same tempo. She could feel the tempo in her body. But the band would play all kinds of crazy things, as long as it was in the same tempo, and Murry wouldn't know, so she'd come out to dance to "Beautiful Lady" and the band would be playing "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You," in waltz time.

On the Road

After we got run out of Boston after Archie the Terrible we ended up in the town of Fonda, halfway between Albany and Utica in a real log cabin. We arrived in the middle of a blizzard, so Renee Roberts decided to become Stormy Weather and that's who she was while we were in Fonda. The only thing going near Fonda was the Beechnut Chewing Gum Factory. So the emcee, Renee, says, "The motto is: Stick it where you stuck it last night. Beechnut Chewing Gum." They wouldn't let her say one without the other.



Vicky Jordan stripped, Renee was actually a ballet dancer but she stripped. I sang and Louella sang and danced but didn't strip. Louella was a lovely person but she died young. She was taking hormones and something went wrong. We had three big production numbers, quick changes and all. I don't know how we did it. The opening number was "Here We Are, the Beauties of the Town." It was from a Mae West movie, "Belle of the Nineties." And here we are doing the "Goodnight Sweetheart" finale. We would sashay around with the night vessel and the douche bag, like we were getting ready to go to bed. It was like a pretty girl finale, but campy.



It was a slow place, Fonda. We only played weekends so we weren't getting paid much, but we got room and board, and it was good board. Honey, we ate well. And there a was nothing else to do in the country, so I got a little plump. It looked nice; plumpness looks good in an impersonator. But this boss was so conservative. We got along like a Quaker and a parrot. He kept saying they had gotten complaints, so I finally said, "If I clean up my act any more, they'll book me in a Sunday school."

Finally it got so that the queens couldn't barrelhouse, and then we all had to sit at one table. One night these state troopers came in and I said, "Louella, here we go."

I worked a lot of tank towns during the McCarthy era, always on the road, in New York and Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, Darby, York, Allentown, Meadville, Spring City. To these people we were Broadway stars, famous actresses. Here's a couple of my admirers.



This boy was in high school in a real tank town, and his mother would come to see the queens. He was too young to come into the club, but he met me and was just crazy about me so started a fan club for me in the high school. This was a real tank town, Bridgeport, Pennsylvania. He sold postcards for me like crazy, and I encouraged him because he was selling all these postcards, but it was a little close for comfort.

And this is a lezzie that wrote me love letters for years until I met him and found out he wasn't a man. I had thought it was a fella. She worked carnival and

got my address from a friend and wrote all these love letters. And I couldn't tell from the pictures that it was a real woman and so I'd write back. There was nothing else to do in the country.

It wasn't just Boston that was drag queen crazy, see. It was the small town clubs, too. They loved fairies, and they could book us cheap, and we brought business.

At the C-Note in Johnstown, Rhode Island, the reason they brought us in was because they couldn't get a bottle of beer on credit. So they hired us and that was sensational in 1951. "Too much for television," was the phrase that was going around. The audiences at the C-Note had never seen much of female impersonators, and they'd say, "Oh my god, they look so real. And they're talented, too!" So the C-Note did huge business. To save a business they'd bring in the fairies.

The only thing that could follow the fairies were the Beef Trusts. And they took up too much room. I guess they fascinated the crowd at the C-Note because they were something strange, something weird. The big fat girls. They'd kick and all and all that flesh would be shaking. When you're fat and all, you have to do something besides just look pretty. You better have an act.

When I was working at the C-Note, I picked up the patter of our emcee Day Sheri. It was a panic. It was

old when Day Sheri used it and I used it myself, years later at the Crazy Horse. A perfect routine because I could stop anywhere if the laughter started to wane, and break into a song.

Here's Day Sheri's patter:



Hello, I just got in town yesterday and what a day it was. There I was standing on the corner, minding my own business. Business was lousy. When up pulls a man in a long shiny limousine a half a block long. He says to me, "Little girl, how would you like to go for a drive with me?" "Paleeeeeeze! What kind of girl do you think I am?"

So as we were motoring out to the woods, the car broke down. We both got out and he pushed and I pushed. I pushed and he pushed. He pushed and I pushed. Do you know, while we were both pushing, somebody stole the car!

Well, I found my way back to the highway, and flagged down a passing trolley. "Mr. Conductor," I said. "Mr. Conductor, please tell me do I pay now when I enter or later when I get off?" "You pay when you enter," says he. "Ooooooh," says I. "It's the same in my business."

When I got back to town, I decided to check into a hotel and there was a big electric sign flashing on and off: Tarantula Arms. That sounds different, so I checked in and the bell boy grabbed my bags. Ooooooh! I was left flat-chested.

He shows me into a small room with no windows and no furniture. "I don't care for this room at all," I says. To which he replies, "Why you damn fool, this is the elevator."

When we got to my floor, the door opened and I alighted. The bridal suite door was ajar and I just sneaked a look. They had twin beds. Over her bed there was a plaque reading, "I Need Thee Every Hour." Over his bed there was another plaque reading, "God Give Me Strength."

I followed the bellhop down the hall and he showed me into a nice little chamber overlooking a waste-paper basket. After all the events of the day, I was rather fatigued, so I decided to turn in. I was just oozing off to sleep, when there came a loud knock at the door. "Who is it?" says I. "It's the house

detective," he replies. "Have you got a man in there?" "Goodness gracious no," says I. So he pushes in a sailor. What a progressive place that was.

After the sailor left again, I was just ooooooozing off to sleep, when a loud bell rang and I heard the sounds of running feet outside. I opened the door to the corridor and stopped a woman passing and said, "Madam." "Don't call me Madame, I'm just one of the girls." "Very well, Girlie," says I, "but please tell me why is that bell ringing and why is everyone running through the halls?" "It's 4 a.m.," she said. "That's when everybody goes back to their own room."

Well, at last I did get to sleep, and the next day when I awoke I decided to do what every young girl should do, and take a bath. As I was filling the tub, I noticed it was leaking out the bottom. I picked up the telephone and said, "Mr. Manager, Mr. Manager, I wish to report I got a leak in the bathtub." "Gotta leak in the bathtub?" says he. "That's all right, lady, the customer is always right."



He told me to bring my own show in and Wacko said, "You don't work no seven nights for me, baby. No seven nights." He was a terrific boss and we worked harder for him than anyone.

I brought in Jerry Whiting, a whiz crack piano player. And she could talk. People would come and she would get an idea and say something and make it all rhyme. Just like that. Even at the height of impersonators, there was no one quite like Jerry Whiting. She was extreme and campy. Of course she was a benny head, too, so she's probably not with us.

We were working Wacko's the Fourth of July weekend, 1951, when we got run out of Providence. I was lucky — I was working in the city limits in a jazz room, and there is a law that the state police can't come into the city limits in Providence. But they went in anyway, and took all the female impersonators and put them in manacles and kept moving them from one different jail to another, and Wacko had these two different lawyers trying to get us out. The state police brought all these queens in chains to the Park Hotel and said they were looking for pot. We couldn't get any — I would have loved to have had some, but we couldn't get any in 1951. And the state police stole my jewel case, all gorgeous costume jewelry with a few real things, too. On top of this, a queen stole my Scarlet O'Hara dress and went east with the geese. All this gay gay costume jewelry gone. That broke my heart.

My Sister Tommy

I've had some troubles, but I haven't been lynched. Like 12 impersonators were in Texas, and I haven't been through as many scrapes as my sister Tommy Bishop.

Miss Bishop grew up in New Orleans and her grandmother ran a bordello, so Tommy learned southern hospitality at an early age. Tommy was very outgoing, a real Elsa Maxwell at a party, and she was like this gypsy adventuress that was always traveling everywhere, all over the world, and always generous. Mostly she worked B-drinks in Dixie. A B-drink was where you got johns to buy you a drink, only B-drinks were phony booze so the bar would make money. You just collected the muddlers — the drink sticks — and at the end of the evening you turned them in and split the money with the bartender. Tommy was big in Phenix City, Alabama. It was a wide open city, like the whole world is today.

One time in Phenix City, the boss told her they needed a special kind of act, so Miss Bishop thought, "Oh, I'll do a snake act." Snake acts were very popular at that time. Only she'd never done one before. She bought a snake — it was probably a water moccasin instead of a boa constrictor — they were more available in Phenix City. So Miss Bishop begins her snake dance and she brings the snake up to give it a gay kiss on the mouth. Only the snake bites her. Tommy threw the snake right in a customer's lap.

Everything happened to that queen. Once she was working bar maid in Miami, and she was waiting for a bus in full face and semi-drag. This guy drove up in a white roadster and says, "Hello, little girl, where are you going?" "I might be going with you, who knows?" she says. So Miss Bishop went with him, and he takes her out to a cypress forest as night was falling. He wants a blow job, so she's going down on him and feels this cold steel at the back of her neck. See, he had a different kind of gun. She realized that when he came he was going to blow her brains out. "Oh Daddy, I have to take a wee-wee." He keeps on holding to her by the belt, so she undid the belt and gave a lunge. He was left holding the belt, and he's shooting away while she's hiding behind a cypress tree all night until he finally left at dawn. Miss Bishop emerged from that swamp, all covered in Spanish moss, walked to the highway, and got a ride from some farmer. Honey, she must have been a sight on the side of the road. The next week, she found out he had escaped from a penitentiary and he had murdered four women in Georgia. It was front page material.

Another time, Miss Bishop was out over Central Park West hanging on a flag pole, without clothes, and her john was cutting the cord. She climbed down the rope to the floor below and they let her in. This was before topless and bottomless. You couldn't work without nets in burlesque and here is Miss Bishop hanging out over Central Park West without anything.

Tommy just says, "Oh, I'm so outgoing."

Well, you can get a little too outgoing. But everyone loved Miss Bishop, from the gypsies downstairs to the lumberjacks.



She worked in a lumber camp way outside of Seattle, and they had her trapped up there. Well, there was no real women up there so she looked like Gloria Swanson to them, or maybe Ann Sheridan. Mary, they were all getting into Miss Bishop, and she's cooking, because she cooks gay. And when she got tired of that she

escaped. It was spring camp and she went down the rapids on a log or something. When she got to Seattle she took a boat up to Alaska because that's where the Seabees were landing. She's very resourceful. Miss Bishop, so she took up with the police chief in Fairbanks and he set Tommy and another queen up in a little house. It was a little hut with a red light on a sled. That's how they do it in Alaska.

And my sister Tommy has grace and manners, too, and that's what makes her a beautiful queen. Miss Bishop is not the dainty type but everything she handles like a Mae Marsh. I remember when I first met Tommy at this meal with the Jewish Madonna, Jackie Philman, and some other queens. Jackie had all these sound effects when she was eating. Terrible sound effects. Rumblings coming up from down below. Well, I looked up at Miss Bishop and there was this immediate camaraderie. We had manners. I still see my sister Tommy all the time when she's not around the world.



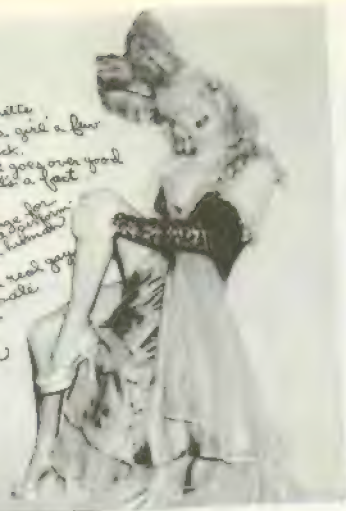


That's a real blackmail photograph of Nicky Gordon, Mickey Cortez, Rayleen, Bobby Clark and myself. We were in a show together in Spring City, Pennsylvania, that started as a two-week stint and we stayed six months. There was a little heat of course — this was the country. Bobby Clark went and blew someone in the parking lot and it got around. So Rayleen said, "Oh, none of us are homosexuals, you know. This is just our profession." So Rayleen made her husband into a cousin. She changed cousins several times that job.

To
Nanette
Here's a girl a few
years back.
She still goes over good
and that's a fact

Stick as
you lose
don't change for
you are a different
thing — a husband
Love to a real guy
& considerable
sister

Rayleen
53



Rayleen did quite an unusual strip. She pranced around in a goose-step-like fashion and then at the end she threw bumps like a gatling gun. More bumps per minute — boom boom boom boom boom — just like that. It was not the most sensual of strips — she came off stage with her bony, hipless body wet with sweat — but it was certainly the most energetic.

Rayleen became paranoid and sometimes she was not exactly the berries to work with. Finally, Rayleen gave up her show business career for shoplifting, and show business said, "Thank you, honey."

Bobby Clark was the one I roomed with. They had her on the wagon because she would get trade-happy when she was drunk. Bobby Clark was "The Double-Voiced Sensation." She'd do duets with herself in a male voice and a female voice. I think she's still working in the Powder Puff Revue.



I ran into Micky Cortez years later, when they were still having drag Thanksgiving balls in Harlem. And she had this little button nose. She'd had it bobbed. "I'm out of show business," Mickey said. "That beautiful new nose and now you don't want to work drag?" I said. "That's crazy!" She said. "It's funny, isn't it, Minette? But I'm doing something else that's making better money. You know how it is, Minette," "I know how it is, honey," I said. "I don't want to be on the road, either. And it's a snake pit working in the Club 82, with all those bennie-heads."



This is Yvette Dare, the only act of its kind in the world. Honey, that was a \$3500 act, which would be \$10,000 today. I toured with Yvette — the whole act was Yvette Dare and the Daring Dolls — all through Dixie. They were so dumb in Dixie they thought a female impersonator was a woman doing impersonations and they couldn't figure out what I was doing impersonations of.

Yvette wasn't an impersonator, but this was a fabulous act. The parrots would strip her, and she worked places where no stripper could work. Those two parrots are Lippy and Einstein. They look like twins to me, macaw parrots with a yard-wide wing spread. Yvette wore a sarong of white crepe tied together, all knots, and then Lippy or Einstein would fly down from the gallery and strip her. Lippy got his name because he used to talk during the act. Yvette was half Indian and she couldn't drink or her mouth would start going. Lippy didn't like that. So, in the middle of the act, Lippy would start saying, "Fuck you, Yvette. Fuck you, Yvette." Oh, you couldn't do that in those days. So that's how Lippy got his name, and Yvette brought in Einstein. He kept his mouth shut. That's why he was called Einstein.

I remember when I first met Billy Richards out of Pittsburg in 1953. I had motored across that state with LaVerne Martin, a carnie snake dancer, in a blizzard, over the mountains. I held a flashlight out the window to spotlight the beginning of the precipice. We didn't go over the edge, so we started playing our club dates. And there was Billy Richards, "the most adorable girl in show business."

Cooching Up a Storm

One of my road tours was with a carnival in 1954. We did split-weeks in Kentucky and Tennessee, half the week in one town and the weekend in the next town. But I had fun. Because I couldn't really take it seriously — it was such a low-level show business and no matter what I did it was glamorous, it was fabulous, and they had me talking. They loved me because I could talk real carnie. Like the barker was the talker, and a townie was a "mark" and a big "Hey, Rube" was a fight. But I learned that just from being a queen in Greenwich Village. Around the late '40s, just before the McCarthy era, all the queens were talking carnie in Greenwich Village.

So they had me talking in the carnival — that means I was the barker and I worked as a real woman. You never worked as an impersonator in the carnival, you always worked as a real woman. If they were in a girlie show, the impersonators didn't strip down — but they did a cooch dance. The cooch was a kind of belly dance that Little Egypt made popular at the World's Fair of 1893. The closest thing to being an impersonator was a hermaphrodite in the side show. Usually if you did a hermaphrodite or half and half you got 25 cents extra which was called the blowoff money. See, it was two bits extra to see the hermaphrodite — that's why they went in anyway — and the queen would get the blowoff for herself.

When I was in the carnival, all the queens were mad for Peggy Yule. She was magic and they always talked about her. She left home in 1875 when she was 15 and ran away with the carnival. She traveled in a covered wagon. Peggy lived in drag and became a real woman as much as she could, not so easy then. She probably used the depilatory wax. And she had long hair, so long she could sit on it, dyed red. Oh, it was gorgeous from what the queens said, and she worked right up to the end. She lived to be 106, and she could hardly walk at the end. But she had a boa constrictor this big around, and she would pull herself up on the boa constrictor and she could cooch up a storm. She could hardly move her feet but she could cooch up a storm, and she was 96 or 98 then. The last few years she couldn't pull up and cooch anymore, so she worked on a chaise lounge and did fortunes.

Peggy always had a place in the show because she was very well loved. Peggy was always willing to stake people and she was very faithful, so there were people she knew in her old age that were ride boys when she met them and now owned the show. When she finally retired they couldn't get Peggy into the house — I suppose the central heating would get to her — so she lived out back in a truck. She was a legend among the queens, Peggy Yule.

Carnivals and clubs were two different seasons — in the summer you'd work carnival and in the winter

you'd work clubs. But a lot of the carnival queens did not like working clubs — it was the difference between outdoor daytime entertainment and working evenings. The real regular old carnies, if they'd done it a long time, were so used to the routine with certain people. They kept going on to different towns but you'd still be in the same trailer and still be with the same people, and you'd always have to carry water, unless you could get someone to carry it for you.



Here's Robbi Del Mar, sort of a subdued Carmen Miranda, half-Spanish, half-Hungarian. See the almond eyes. They used to bill her as "the boy with the longest hair in Providence." This was in 1951, see, they didn't have the hippies yet. She was very bright and went to college and she had her whole family working the carnival with her. See her poster here, "Front Page People" — that's Robbi and her family. Her sister married a Naval officer, and they were natural-

ly well-bred, but from what I heard it was not her father's side of the family that made her well-bred.



And here's Talla Rae. She's dead now, I think. She was a circus queen and had never worked clubs before. And she put her lipstick on by applying it to a spool and putting it on her mouth with a spool instead of using a lip brush.

New York and Films

When I left Fonda on one of those road trips I didn't have any boy's wardrobe left, so I went to New York and became Rose Revere, Real Woman. I lived in drag for about two months.



I didn't know New York as well as Boston, of course, but it was very conservative. The only cabaret left on the Bowery was Sammy's Bowery Follies, and prices for queens were low and going down. It was the summer of 1949 the prices went right down. My sisters used to hustle in Washington Square and business got bad, so they went to 42nd Street — that's where the johns were. Then the Puerto Rican queens came in — when a queen would ask for \$5, one of the Puerto Rican queens would raise a hand behind her, and someone else would make a lower offer behind her. In a fortnight, business was shot to hell. They should have had a gay hookers' union.



Here's Chris Scarlet and my sister Bobby Dale at Sammy's Bowery Follies, along with some johns. The headliner at Sammy's was Dora Pollitier, who cut down at the end of her life to weekends and kept working at Sammy's until she was 96. She'd always close her act dancing a cake walk to the last chorus of "Waitin' For the Robert E. Lee."

And that's Chris Scarlett on the right with some john. When I first met Chris, she was the male partner of The Dancing Wallaces. They were teenagers and they won the national jitterbugging contest. The families made them get married because they were teenagers and this was Lowell, Mass. So the Dancing Wallaces jitterbugged all over the country and then they came back and did what was left of vaudeville. His wife started getting dates with all these johns, so Chris said, "Well, if she can do it, I can do it." So the

juvenile make-up became a little more pronounced, the cheeks a little rosier, and she started getting johns and she and her wife split up. They had a little child Little Robin. Of course, Little Robin is a grown up man now. Little Robin.

Here's Chris Scarlett in one transformation, doing the fan dance.



The queen clubs in New York in the late forties and early fifties were Phil's 111, and the Moroccan Village, and the 181. But Phil never paid his help so the 111 closed and the 181 closed in 1950 and became the Club 82, until it closed in 1972, and now it's reopened as a salsa dance parlor. The Club 181 was a sort of Jewel Box Revue with not as much sparkle but a lot of talent. A lot of benny heads, too.



One of the big names at the 82 was Titanic. Titanic was a beautiful queen and she could come out on stage with this gravelly voice and just dish and the audience would love her. Real corny material. She'd pick out

someone in the audience and say, "Oh, I wish I had your picture, I have a perfect frame for it. A toilet seat." But Titanic could always pull that material off, because Titanic was something special. She used to do Carol Channing's numbers from "Gentlemen Prefer Blonds" — my favorite musical since "Anything Goes" — and had her hair cut like Channing. Carol Channing would come down to the club all the time, and she loved the queens. She was just like one of the queens: six feet tall, a camp. And she's still going strong, honey.

And before the legend that drag queens oppress women came along, the lezzies and the queens used to mix at Tony Pastor's. See, it wasn't the lezzies that were angry about the queens — it was a group called the Faggot Effeminists, one of the lesser lights of gay liberation. One of them said to me, "Minette, do you know that drag queens oppress women?" And I said, "Honey, I was always under the impression that you can't oppress someone unless you have power over them. When you get in drag, you oppress women. When I get in drag, I glorify them."

The lezzies used to mix with the drag queens. The fairies and the lezzies didn't mix, but the queens did because we all used to hustle at Tony Pastor's on West 3rd Street. The johns would come in looking for something kinky or to try to convert a lezzie. If a lezzie



was looking to make it with a man, she wouldn't be a lezzie, right? Well, that was what was so rare about those johns. So after a few drinks, the lezzies would turn them over to us and the john would end up with a queen. The queens looked so much prettier anyway, cause we tried. We used to put on a face that was like juvenile makeup onstage. We used Magic Touch, this powder and pancake combined so you could put it on like face powder but it had more body. We did look good, we were young then, we were pretty. Sometimes you'd get a john. I'll sing you a song I used to do. It was a parody of a song called "The Lady in Red." I called it "The Lezzie in Red."

The lezzie in red, that's right folks, it's lezzie,
Not Lizzie, I said. Her sex life is dizzy
She's busy getting all the girls in bed.
Oh the lezzie in red is driving her taxi
When the town should be dead.
Though she's not a man, some few chicks sure can
Fill her pencil wth lead.
Just like a fairy, she likes her vice versa.
She's a pansy without a stem.
If you will tarry, she'd love to rehearse ya.
If you don't belong to the sex known as men.
Oh the lezzie in red's one fish who don't swish
She likes the women instead
So to straight girls I say "stay away"
From the lezzie in red.



This is my old beau Rob Roy. He's got a campy tale
— he became the Baron von Lichtenstein. And he was

a sheik, even though this picture looks like a rogue's gallery shot. Lichtenstein is this tiny country, and right after World War II Rob Roy was in Lichtenstein in the black market. He met someone in Lichtenstein — a prince or a duke or something like that — and he made Rob Roy the Baron von Lichtenstein. He didn't call himself the Baron von Lichtenstein very much. It would have been a little ridiculous, this poor guy in Philadelphia starving most of the time — the "Baron von Lichtenstein." He was a hotel clerk when I met him in 1954, and he played piano in a gay bar. Him and I were pals more than lovers. I really did love him and he did love me, but there were just too many other things going on. I wonder what happened to him.



I've done a lot of things since I came back to New York besides being a chanteuse. I'd take work as a stitch bitch in off-times, and in 1957 I was discovered by the celluloid medium. It wasn't MGM, it was Avery Willard and his Avegraph Films. They were silent movies, mostly eight millimeter, with lots of queens in these campy tales. On one of my last films, Avegraph introduced Avetone, the poor man's Vitaphone. Once in a blue moon the Avetone would get together with the picture in synch, but usually the dancer would come out and the singer would start, or I would start talking and a low man's voice would come out. After a while, Avery started filming the leather boys, so he could no longer get me to work for him.



One of the best parts of my Avegraph film career was meeting my friends from the Ridiculous Theatrical Company on the set of the last film. My Riduculous friends and I were supposed to be a Ten Cents a Dance place, and the Avegraph cinematographer brought back some Moroccan hashish. Honey, nobody wanted for nothing that night.

I was dancing with Lola Pashalinski — she was twice her size today — in a red zoot suit and Charles Ludlam was wearing earrings that this sailor was trying to eat off. Lola is fabulous — a diesel dyke at heart but she can play a soubrette or sing opera without lessons, and Charles is brilliant. I owe a lot to my Ridiculous friends, because they taught me how to eat right. Even though it sometimes gets dear, I always eat the right food — as organic as possible.

I've just finished a part in a silent movie Charles Ludlam has made with all the Ridiculous people and Crazy Arthur, "The Sorrows of Dolores."

It was I who introduced Crazy Arthur to the Ridiculous company and they re-introduced him to show business. As a kid he'd been a burlesque comic that worked the Loew's circuit and now he was Orgone, the hunchback pin-headed sex maniac in Turds in Hell, one of the great Ridiculous productions. I told Crazy Arthur to come today, but I think he wanted you to interview him lying down in bed. You just tell him, "Mother, it's not nice to talk with your mouth full."

Besides my Avegraph career, I was used for the soundtrack of the movie "The Queen." I sang "Am I Blue." I started with that song at three years old and there I was still singing it.

The Queen's producer, Flawless Sabrina, came up to me at the Crazy Horse where I was working. Flawless Sabrina was actually very unflawless, sort of like a World War II record, which would crack if you looked at it. "One night, \$50," she says, so I said okay. It turned out the band was Sam the Man Taylor, who I had played with a few years before in Hazelton, Pennsylvania, so that was gay. But the Flawless Sabrina was another story. She thought she had removed all the professional impersonators from the film, but little did they know that Mario Montez was a professional. She was in the classic, "Flaming Creatures," and all those Andy Warhol films. In this show of Flawless Sabrina's, they brought her down in a wrinkled lame dress in a bathtub, and they had her in greasepaint without any powder over, so she looked like a grease ball. I later taught Mario how to use powder. A fabulous queen. But you know how much Miss Montez has been paid for all the films she did for Andy Warhol? A total of \$110. That is usury.

But back to another usurer, the Flawless Sabrina. She said it was a sold out house and we couldn't even get any comps. When I looked through the curtains, about a fifth of the orchestra was filled, so I quick asked the secretary how we were going to get paid. "In

checks," she said. Well, I went to my sisters from the Jewel Box Revue and said, "Girls, this looks serious. They're going to pay us in checks." Fortunately, we demanded on the spot cash from the Flawless Sabrina. Mario has still never been paid a cent for that show.

By 1965, after my celluloid career, I had had a nervous stomach for a dozen years, mostly because I was in show business. Where was I going to work next? Where was the money going to come from? I was going to emigrate to Morocco with my friend the Professor. We thought we could both live off his GI bill. And then I took acid.

I was sitting here in the parlor with a couple boys like you and in came a man I knew who was a real sad sack, a non compes mentis, "the worst thing on Christopher Street," he is now called. But on this day, his lowness came in and his eyes were all lit up and he's so vivacious. "I took LSD 25," he said. "Lead me to it" I said. "If it can do that for you, it can make me a genius."

So I took a trip and my nervous stomach cleared up. On that trip I said to myself, "Kid, all your life jobs have been dying out from under you. Burlesque. Vaudeville. Nightclubs. Everything died out." And I said, "Why go to Morocco? Morocco has come to me." See, you'd go over to the Casbah — that's what I call the section of Tompkins Square — and you'd think you were in Morocco. All these hippies and these freaky bulbous people.

That was 1965 and to me, honey, the hippies were a Renaissance. There was never anything in my experience like them — it was the only period that I lived through that I identify with good art. I felt like all my life I had been waiting for the hippies to come along. It was the only time I was ever in style — I had always been 10 years ahead and 20 years behind.

Gay Liberation

It was Billy Bike that first told me about the Gay Liberation Front. He said, "You must come." Another friend of mine said, "Oh, don't go there — there's nothing but dirty old men: they want it for nothing." Well, there were a few dirty young men, but very few old ones. There were more lezzies mixed in with the fairies in the GLF than any other group. It was lovely. I never went to the meetings much — I could never figure out when to talk and I was always out of turn.

That wasn't so true in the GLF as it was in GAA. When GAA took over, Mary, gay liberation started getting very straight, talking about Robert's Rules of Order. I remember Sylvia Rivera who founded STAR — Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. She was always trying to say things — the same kinds of things Marcia P. Johnson says in a sweeter way — and they treated her like garbage. If that's what "order" is, haven't we had enough?

Gay liberation was natural for me because I was a hippy. It was much tougher for the ribbon clerks, the straight life ones, because they had to live a double life. But, after acid and after the hippies, it was easy for me.

I joined a gay consciousness-raising group and I was very lucky because my CR group was all radical young hippies. I was the oldest one of all of them, but I always had a generation gap with my own generation so that didn't make any difference. We'd take a subject apart and we would relate our own experiences so I could see my own life as more than just a personal thing. I saw it in a better context. That was the crux of a good consciousness-raising group.

I got involved with Communitas, a gay liberation group in Brooklyn, and they wanted me to put together a show for them. The place was out in God's country, beyond Flatbush, at the end of the subway line, so it was cursed before it started, but I decided to give it a try. And I got all these singers and dancers and all but I had to get a stripper. You gotta have a stripper to make it look professional, you know. And it couldn't be an amateur. "It's got to be graceful, it's got to be done right," I told them. And about that time Taffy Titz rang me up. "Titz with a Z," she always said. And I had my stripper.

I met Taffy when he was a teenager named Clyde, and it was at one of Frannie's soirees. Franny — she's the queen that still runs The Opulent Era on Christopher Street — used to have these soirees and then she'd stop them in the middle and show people how lovely her shop things were. That was the only soiree I'd been to that had a commercial break. I met Taffy there before she was in drag, and she'd always call me up asking advice on this and that. And Taffy started getting in the business. Her specialty was a tassel dance. A tassel dancer has tassels attached to the end of the tit cups and usually on the ass, and gets them all going at once, sometimes in opposite directions. It takes enormous skill to do well.

When Taffy rang me up, she said, "Oh, I just gave away my wardrobe a few months ago and I'm out of drag now." So I pulled together things from my Free Store. The Free Store was leftovers from rummage sales and things I get from my sisters, and from the street. I said to Taffy, "Look at this beaded top, Taffy, you could make a bra out of that, and this chiffon skirt could make gorgeous panels, and if you need any help with the stitches, I'm an experienced stitch bitch." So Taffy returned to the business.

I arrived late for the show. I was in semi-drag in the pouring rain, climbing over a fence, my curls coming down, my shoes soggy, with a full face on, running down. The first half was over, but Taffy was yet to

come. And I will say, she was lovely, like a Theda Bara with her dark hair. And she kept her mouth shut, so her routine was fabulous. She was so graceful she tore the house down.

After the first show, they asked me to put together other shows. They had the Hot Peaches, and Mario Montez and Alexis Del Lago (the male Marlene Dietrich, star of "Shanghai Local"), and James Mofogin, and of course Taffy Titz. But Taffy couldn't stay graceful forever. She was supposed to be glamorous, but she had to be campy. So we put this show in a church. Can you imagine, they built a special runway for Taffy, and she came out with industrial house numbers on her ass. There she is, on the church runway, flashing 69 on her ass. Taffy was a punk before her time.



This is the Gay Day Be-In of 1972 — looks like I've got some campy thought buzzing around up there. That

gay button I'm wearing was designed by Spin Star. I met Spin in a picket line in front of a homophobic bookstore on Fifth Avenue — I only picket in the best areas. I guess Spin and I were sort of lovers, until we started living together. This was the only Gay Day I ever marched in — I usually just showed up at the end rallies — and that was because of Spin and because he worked day and night for Gay Day.



Here I am at the benefit the Hot Peaches did for WBAI in 1977. It was my last public performance, until now anyway. It was a gorgeous show and the Peaches were at their peachiest. I sang the "St. Louis Blues" parody, which starts out "I hate to see my little son go down."

At Home in the New Depression

Making money is a difficult thing to do during this Depression. My last steady job was at the Crazy Horse in 1967, and then it got so that I could make more money staying home on a weekend doing horizontal entertainment than I could make working all week long at the Crazy Horse. I had johns then, before they all got "liberated."

I remember one I picked up about 15 years ago on the way to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which is gone now. He was sort of shot, had an awful lot to drink, and a lot of mileage, but he started calling me "Baby" and holding my hand. He was only a \$10 trick, but he was a darling boy, and a marvelous lover. He was only a \$10 trick, but whenever he'd come into town he'd call me up, and he'd really treat my like a lady. I last saw him about six years ago. That last time he gave me \$15.

Most of these guys in recent years — well, they're weirdos. What's a weirdo? I don't know. Use your imagination. I just used to add \$5 for anything new they wanted to do. Between the Depression and my age — I'm not sweet sixteen anymore and they always want youth and they don't make many two-watt lightbulbs — it doesn't make much sense to do johns anymore. Maybe I'll become a telephonic Madame.

I keep my hand in a lot of things and make the money to stay alive. I have this transie I see once in a while. Julia Child. My job is to put him in drag and give him tips on being a woman and escort him. I play the male escort. Isn't that a camp? He's 6'2" and he walks like a country rube, all hunched over. And he hunches over his food, asking me if he should take his gloves off while he's eating. If he gets to be too much for me, I say "Grace and beauty!" and he straightens up.

And of course I have my music lessons. Even if your fingers feel like toes when you tickle the ivories, my new improved music lessons (at no rise in price) will do the trick. I love turning on my friends to old tunes.

But you boys came to hear about the art of female impersonation, and this has more to do with the art of staying alive.

Well, I guess we've run out of pictures. So many of those people are gone. Lots from drinking — it's easy for a queen to become an alcoholic, always working around drinks. And of course there were the benny-heads that were very very brilliant for a short time and then eventually got evil and died. The hormone girls — I've known several where the operation was not a success. So they're gone and here I am, still a young flapper.

When I took my first acid trip, I saw so much, and I've become more of a recluse. I no longer have the desire to be the life of the party, to be an Elsa Maxwell, like my sister Tommy. I have lovely things around me here, even if this isn't such a campy neighborhood. See, most of these things I have had for a long time. They're old, so the material is good. And I've lived with them for a long time. When I first moved here it was middle class. That was 1955. I thought I would stay a short time. Now it's 24 years later, and the neighborhood is bombed-out looking, and I'm still here. Isn't that a camp?

Sometimes, it's not so campy. The slumlord downstairs has this hyperactive child and they feed it sugar all day so it runs around — boom da boom boom boom. All sugar. Look out the window — all black faces — oops! There's a white face. Must be a cop in drag. Here, let's close these shutters — we're not putting on a free show for those bums. Nobody's paying.

But it's hard to beat a five-room flat for \$32, even if the walls are Niagara when it rains. And I have my piano. I play every day, mostly rags, especially the master, Scott Joplin. There's one song I've been looking for all my life. "I'm the Hostess of a Burn Cabaret." I never found it, though.

My friend Crazy Arthur contacts spirits and he says one of them helps me play the piano. His name is Bob and he lived here from 1895 to 1905 and he played piano in one of the theaters. He was a straight man that wanted to come out, but didn't, all those years before gay liberation. Bob's crazy about me. And Crazy Arthur says that when I relax enough Bob can get into my body and play.⁴ So I'll just relax and sit up real straight and say, "Bob, do your stuff!"

I'm glad I'm not a young queen today, honey. I think it's very sad and tough, especially since the demise of gay liberation. Things are going in the opposite direction, back to the fifties. It's like they won. The punks.

I hate to see the hippy style go. All those fabulous clothes. Gone. I have a friend, when I met him he had frizzed hair down to his asshole and glitter on his face. He was a parody of a hippy. Now he's a parody of a straight person. If he dressed any straighter you'd mistake him for a Chinese waiter. It's so altered. I definitely have a generation gap with this post hippy generation.

Times have been hard, of course, and they will be hard again, but that doesn't mean you have to immediately get dark and ugly. No wonder straight people are worried about gay liberation. Now, not only do they think we are going to suck their son's cock, they think we are going to bite it off. The only way to

get out of darkness is to want to be liberated and try for something beautiful. If you do things ugly, people treat you ugly.

That's all the campy tales for today, boys. I feel so lit up on that bit of tea. I guess it's talking about all these gay times. If you want to go to the bathroom before you leave, take matches and light the candle over the toilet. The slumlord won't fix the plumbing and there's no electricity in there. It looks best in candlelight anyway. But be sure and blow it out when you're finished, because my sister Double John isn't working for the church where she liberated those candles from. Not anymore.

Take some tea for the road, boys, and make that subway ride gorgeous.





A raucous, moving account of an underground show business circuit—from vaudeville to burlesque to carnivals to raunchy nightclubs—told by its wisest doyenne.

"An important historical document,"

—Doris Lundén

"I was fascinated by this book. It tells all and worse than all about a way of life that many people—even the gay ones—have never known. Reading it, I felt my own autobiography was conservative, almost stuffy."

—Quentin Crisp,

author of *The Naked Civil Servant*

Workin' Cheap Time: an Interview with Minette

I met Minette, drag diva of a bygone era, in early June, 1998. I knew her autobiography, *Recollections of a Part-Time Lady*, a gem of gender history. With its color Xerox cover it looks more like a report than a book. In it are Minette's sweet rambling remembrances, 30 years of shows, sequins and sailors, from the 1940's to the 1970's. Minette performed in vaudeville at age 3, was almost expelled from grammar school for impersonating Mae West for the class, and was a professional drag artiste at 16. In her autobiography she says that drag "caused a regular separation among my friends, among my agents. See, I was working cheap-time because I was working (in) drag, and they could have gotten more money from me in other ways. But I felt so liberated, finally, working in drag. To be me, to be feminine. It felt gorgeous." The thought of meeting the dear petal had me all a-tizzy for a week before the interview.

Minette lives in faded elegance. Her Victorian flat is cluttered with genuine antiques suspended between restoration and decay. "I buy and sell antiques... I just got that mirror yesterday. Just that one thing and I went all over. Originally it wasn't a mirror. It was a picture frame from the 1850's or '60's. So that made it worth it."

When I spoke with her over the phone, she warned me that she hadn't been in drag for twenty years. That wasn't a problem, I assured her. Stories from the old shows would be fine. Minette's era was very different than ours. There was much more repression, secrecy, and the connection between drag and crime was much stronger. This was what I wanted to learn about.

The interview began with a reticence similar to that she expressed on the phone. She talked about the Harvey Milk documentary that had been on television the night before. I had brought some 20's sheet music, which she sight-read at the piano. With the Charleston still ringing in our ears she asked me where I was from. When I told her I was from Philadelphia the interview really began:

Minette: Oh, I was in Philadelphia. That cop, the one who was mayor, made it impossible to work.



Ms Bob: *Who, Frank Rizzo? (Frank Rizzo, Philadelphia's mayor during the Nixon era, was the Chief of Police before he was Mayor.)*

M: Yes! In 1955, I was living in Philly and trying to work. They wouldn't book you downtown. They booked me at a night club out on 63rd Street, between South and Market someplace. I sang. There were two other queens in the show, Leslie Marlowe and Jerri Paris. We were impersonators and got cut after only a split week, three nights. There were a couple of non-impersonators on the bill. One was Princess Fasia, who had been wed to the last king of Egypt, or so she claimed. She was a belly dancer and quite good, as I recall. The boss said, if we don't get rid of the queens, he's (Rizzo) going to close the whole show. So, then I went to work in a carnival in New Jersey. And that was so easy.

B: *What did you do in the carnival that was so easy?*

M: In the carnival, I performed out front (on the midway) with two baby boa constrictors. Inside I defied death in the electric chair. What made it easy was that the other acts didn't have much pizzazz, so,

Ms Bob
&
Carol Kleinmaier



that made me look good by comparison. I was living in drag and the customers thought I was real. I was just a pretty girl in the carnival as far as they knew.

B: How old were you then?

M: I'm 69 now, so I was about 26 or 27 then. Harvey Lee appeared

with us one Saturday. I don't know if you've ever heard of Harvey Lee? She was beautiful. She had a (Borzoi, a dog like a) Russian Wolfhound. She used to have a pair and she'd just walk out. She didn't have to do anything. She didn't really do anything very much anyway. (laughs)

Harvey was living in New York on the upper West Side. She performed in drag in the show, but didn't live in drag. The carnival was The Virginia Grater Carnival, a small time show. We were in a town closer to New York than Philadelphia when Harvey visited, a real tank town. But, we got to make a little money and get away from Rizzo. And as long as the carnival was close enough for someone to pick me up in an auto, I remained with the show. After awhile I said, "To hell with this." So I came to New York.

B: Did you perform in New York?

M: In those days you could work at the 181 Club or the Moroccan Village or the One Eleven. And you had to get your pay every night at the One-Eleven before they'd gamble it away. The 181 had a fabulous show. Kit Russell was at the 181 Club. She sort of ran it. It was located at 2nd Ave and 12th Street in the cellar. And the Johns were great, but the stars got the best Johns and there was a lot of dissension backstage. Some of the queens were on "bennies" or stronger things. The 181 was afraid of being raided and eventually they were.

When I was working at the 181 I was paying \$10.00 a month rent. I was at 9th Ave. and 43rd Street... The area was called Paddy's Market. They sold things on the street,

dented cans of this and that, a nickel each. And we worked until 4 in the morning. The town was really open all night then. The movies ran 24 hours a day on 42nd Street. And now, (said in horror) 10 o'clock (starts to cough) closing down. It's like some small town. People don't have the money. They all have to work to pay the rent. Sad.

And they (the club management) really had you under their thumb. I didn't want to do it. So I worked one door from Christopher Street on Bleecker as a "stitch bitch." I worked in a dress shop. I did the hems and the facing and waited on the customers when the boss was in the cellar.

B: Were you still living in drag?

M: No. Oh, that's too much work. I lived in drag in 1952 for a couple, maybe three months. I was living in Greenwich Village. It was strictly illegal to be in drag then on the streets. The reason I was living in drag was that I didn't have any boy's clothes with me and in drag I could turn tricks.

So, I don't know if you ever heard of Chris Scarlet? She was working in Chester, Pennsylvania and she told me about this job. So, I went to Chester. I was actually booked in Spring City, Pennsylvania. I'm sure you never heard of that. We were there for six months in a hotel, and across the river was a larger little town called Rollinsford on the Reading (Railroad) line. We put shows on in the dinning room. The people came from all over. We lived up stairs. Then we got booked in Norristown, and it was closer, so I could commute from Philadelphia on that little interurban (the Philadelphia & Western which still runs today —JAR). We were there for about a month. Then in the winter time the business finally died away.

B: Sounds like you were getting mainstream audiences.

M: Yes, we had gay people, but we had couples and everyone else. Rayleen, the head of the show, she put on these production numbers. They thought we were Broadway stars. The performers they had locally didn't do much.

You see, a lot of shows didn't say they were female impersonators. The 181 Club just said, "A show that is different." They didn't want to say female impersonators. They were afraid.

B: Afraid of being raided. Were you ever raided?

M: Well, there was a place called Ollie Knipples in Harrisburg. We were run out of there on Valentine's Day, '54. After the show they were having a big party and we get

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the phone call. When the cops came to the club, we went next door. They arrested Birdie La Page who was older. She had played Baltimore when they had so many drag clubs, right after booze came back in 1933. Anyway, I didn't even see the cops, thank goodness. I was out by sundown the next day to Philadelphia.

I was very lucky. I was working at a place called the C Note, which was outside of Providence, Rhode Island. I left there because I was offered a job working in Providence in this back room. It was really a side room off the big room. And I brought in Jerry Whiting, the piano player, and Bobby Hall, who worked in boy's clothes, and we put on a show. And we were open after hours.

The C Note was raided. They arrested Roxie King, Day Cherie, Chris Scarlet, Joie Tone, Kit Stevens, Robin Del Mar, and some other girls. And these poor queens, they kept moving them from one jail to another. But there was a law in Rhode Island that the state cops could not go into Providence. And that law saved me.

My boss, Rocco Martinelli, a rum-runner during Prohibition, was so good to me. He used to take me to breakfast in a fancy place. When they decided to close the club, he gave me \$100, which was a lot more money than it is today. And I got back to the College Inn. The College Inn was the fancy club in Boston. I worked there with Dixie Gordon. This was about 1951. Rocco used to come up from Providence with a big party about every two or three weeks. He was wonderful. So, since I came back to New York, I haven't been working very much. I mean you work a weekend and by the time the band knows your numbers, it's time to go. So it's very discouraging. And it's always out of town. So now it's different.

This was hardly the end of the interview. The stories went on, three times more than we needed. Plenty of material for future installments: the Crazy Horse, Pudgy Roberts, Miss Tish, Minette's book release party at the Ridiculous Theatre Company, Charles Ludlam, Ethyl Eichelberger, and, of course, Minette's starring roles in Avery Willard's classic 8 mm films, which ensure our "Part-Time" lady's place in underground film history.

This is a tremendous amount of activity considering police and politicians were clamping down on gender expression. In this era a man couldn't cross the street in a dress and even theatrical drag performances could be raided. Doesn't this, plus low wages, and banishment to the margins of society, seem a high price to pay for simply wanting to "feel gorgeous?" And if you're surprised by

Minette's passing references to bennies, rum-runners, tricks, or gambling, remember, when wearing a dress is a crime, crossdressers hang around with criminals.

We would like to thank Liz McGherity, Dan Nicoletta and Matt Wood for their cooperation in arranging this interview.

If there is any subject or person you'd be interested in seeing in "Flash Back," *Lady Like's* history column, please drop us a note and we will try to oblige.



Ms BOB is always interested in contacting other collectors of gender books, photos, magazines and ephemera to compare collections, trade, buy or sell. Several times a year she distributes a list of items she has available. Please, drop her a line if you'd like to receive this list. Ms. Bob can be reached care of LadyLike or at bdavis@sfu.edu.

CAROL KLEINMAIER is a founding member of Transgendered Notion. For over a decade she has been an activist for both gender and AIDS issues.

If there is any subject or person you'd be interested having covered in Flash Back, please drop us a note and we will try to oblige.

Part-Time Lady... Full Time Queen

Part 2 of the interview with Minette.

There is something eternal about Minette, the child performer in vaudeville who wasn't happy until she was a professional female impersonator. She starred in underground drag films by Ava-Graph Studio and was the subject of a biography, *Recollections of a Part-Time Lady*. When we met her she hadn't performed in 20 years. In the last issue of *LadyLike* we followed Minette's career from Philadelphia to Providence through bars, clubs, showrooms and carnival midways. This installment is all New York tales and the names in it are more familiar to *LadyLike* readers.

After moving to New York Minette's circle grew to include some of Manhattan's more influential gender interpreters. Of course, she continued to work with professional impersonators, like Harvey Lee and Pudgy Roberts. But being in New York in the 1960's brought her to the cutting edge of avant-garde gender expression and film working with Andy Warhol "superstars" like Jackie Curtis, and in films by Jack Smith and Avery Willard. Jack Smith was the producer/director of *Flaming Creatures* (1963), a magnificent celluloid transvestite party, starring Minette's friend Mario Montez. When *Flaming Creatures* was revived in San Francisco at the Pacific Film Archive, J. Hoberman, preeminent film critic for the *Village Voice*, flew to town to pay homage by introducing this masterpiece of camp.

The greatest surprise in our interview was Minette's close relationship with Charles Ludlam and Ethyl Eichelberger, goddesses of queer theater. After Ethyl's death in August, 1990, *New York Times* theater critic Mel Gussow proclaimed, "His impact on experimental theater was indisputable... As an actor and playwright, he diminished sexual barriers and punctured pretension. Above all, he always retained his sense of the ridiculous." This latter statement, besides being true, is a not-so veiled reference to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, where Ethyl was a performer and Charles Ludlam one of the founders. In the introduction to Ludlam's collected plays Steven Samuels writes that, "Not since Molière have we been blessed with such a playwright, and it may

be several centuries more before we see his like again." The Ridiculous was reestablished a few years ago by Everett Quinton, Ludlam's long-time lover and co-star. The Ridiculous' current production of Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is sold out for months in advance.

To us Minette is legendary. And what becomes a legend most? Being with other legends. Minette has an eternal quality, illustrated by an incident years after she stopped performing: "One time a boy comes up to me and says, 'Weren't you Minette?' And I said, 'I still am.'"

Ms Bob: Tell me about the biography, *Recollections of a Part-Time Lady*. When was it published?

Minette: They had the publication party the 20th





of May '79 at Ridiculous Theatrical Company at Number One Sheridan Square. Charles Ludlam and Ethyl Eichelberger were fabulous people. They changed my life, especially Ludlam. Oh my goodness, Queen Ethyl, I went to her funeral (at) St. John the Divine. Someone else you should talk to is Agosto Machado. Agosto Machado worked in a lot of shows with the late Queen Ethyl and worked with Jackie Curtis and Jack Smith. I worked with Jack Smith.

B: Were you in any of his movies?

M: Yes, *The Borrowed Tambourine*. I didn't work with him too much because he tried to murder me! He tried to strangle me to death. The thing that saved my life was that he grabbed a piece of knitwear. Now knitwear gives; it stretches; that's what saved me from being murdered. So afterwards I said, "Why did you do that?" And he accused me of stealing something from his loft. I think it was a pearl ring. "There was nobody there but you," says he. And I says, "What about the little Japanese girl? She was on the settee asleep." And he strikes his hand to his forehead and says,

"Oh my God, I forgot about her!" He had a murderous soul. Jackie Curtis beat him up once.

B: So, when did you write the book?

M: Well, Steve Watson, who was a psychiatrist, is the writer. He said he wanted to write a book about me. I always thought it was a dumb idea. I said, "I'm out of the business for years. It won't make any money." But the more he heard about me the more he wanted to write this book. It was the first book he ever wrote. I could have done it much better. He got a lot of things mixed up you see.

B: Don't you like the book the way it is?

M: There's a lot of things that are poorly stated, a lot of things left out that would be interesting, a lot of fabulous pictures.

B: Is it generally accurate?

M: Yes, generally accurate, but this guy (Steve Watson) didn't have a good command of the English language, not that I do, but this guy went to college! He didn't have the writer's flair. A fellow wanted to re-do my book and I said, "Forget it; it's already done." You know what I mean?

B: It's written in the first person, so it sounds like you talking.

M: Yes, that's right. He did what he wanted to. The books were made on a Xerox machine. It was a cheap thing. They say a lot were sold in Europe, but we never got paid for it. They just copied them. Anybody could do it.

B: When you say "a lot" what do you mean. 500? 1,000?

M: Something like that. 500 anyway. They sold most of them at the publication party at Number One Sheridan Square and through the mail.

B: Tell me about the publication party.

M: I asked Charles Ludlam, "Do you think Stephen Brecht would have the party at his house?" His father was Bertold Brecht. They own a whole house on Washington Street. Charles said, "Why don't you have it at the theater?" Never thought to ask. We sent out 200 invitations. A thousand people showed up. It was fabulous. They were putting on Camille and all these people are waiting quietly in the lobby for Camille to finish the death scene. (laughs)

continued next page



It was a wonderful production. Miss Ludlam and Everett Quinton were marvelous.

B: Sounds like Ludlam and Ethyl were very aware of female impersonation history.

M: Well, they learned a lot of it from me!

B: Pudgy Roberts talks about going to an Ethyl Eichelberger show and Ethyl practically stopped the show to announce that Pudgy Roberts had arrived.

M: Yes, well, she used to do it with me. "Oh, there's Minette!" This and that and the other and start talking to me. She was marvelous. She'd just work it in. Oh, she was terrific. I miss her very much. She lived with Big John

(D. Brockmeyer) & Black-Eyed Susan out on Staten Island. I saw Queen Ethyl at least once at Lincoln Center. One of those theaters. She did Abe Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln. Marvelous. But the piano player was terrible. I think the tea is probably ready.

(Later as Minette serves us tea and hospitality.) I don't usually have tea or coffee. I'm on a macrobiotic diet for many years. The whole Ridiculous Theatrical Company went on a macrobiotic diet when they were doing *Bluebeard* (1970). Ludlam got them on it. I saw what it did for their work. They had lessons. I never had lessons. I just asked questions. I stay on it because it does so much for me. They all went on it, but they all slipped off.

B: Yes. So how did you meet Charles Ludlam?

M: Through Mario Montez. Mario Montez, I met (when) we worked in a show together called *Mindblow USA* in '67. The producer was The Flawless Sabrina from Philadelphia, the queen of poor trash. She was not flawless. She put on this show at Town Hall and her original cast walked out on her. So that's how I got into the show. I was one of the six feature acts. There was Robin Rogers and Mal Michles, formerly *Tempera*, and the whole chorus from the *Jewel Box Revue*. Mario Montez was one of the feature acts and we met. They kept bringing us to rehearsals. My God! What did I need all those rehearsals for? I did a couple numbers, that was it.

Anyway, we were doing this big production number in one of the *Ava-Graph* films. We all played taxi-dancers. You know what a taxi dancer is? The men used to buy dances from





Ava - Gaph's
"The Last of The WorthingTons"

these girls for ten cents a dance. And that's a taxi dancer. Jackie Curtis' grandmother, mother and Aunt Josie did this work years before Jackie was born, back in the 1930's. You would have enjoyed Jackie Curtis. She put on some good shows. She did wonderful impressions of people.

So, Mario Montez brought the Ridiculous Theatrical Company to the Ava-Gaph Studio to be in this number. My dancing partner was Lola Pashalinski in a red zoot suit and a pork pie hat. Ludlam was in drag and he was dancing with this guy dressed as a sailor. Ludlam was wearing pearl drop earrings and he had the guy try to bite the pearl drop

earrings off. He was so inventive. We worked all night long on one number.

B: So you were still performing in the '60's?

M: I was working at the Crazy Horse. That's how I met Pudgy Roberts. Very interesting person. Talented and she draws beautifully. I can tell you a lot of marvelous stories. Her husband, Johnny, would be standing in the wings and out of the side of her mouth she's talking to Johnny while she performed. The audience never saw. (laughs) And she trained Johnny to do her act. That's right, because sometime she'd have another booking and he would do her act. And it was a fabulous act. Funniest comedy strip I've ever seen in my life. She wanted to be a star and Johnny said, "I'll make a star of you." And he did a pretty good job.

B: How long were you at the Crazy Horse?

M: A few months. The boss was not good at paying, that's why I left. I said, "Who needs it?" I could do horizontal entertainment and I didn't have to take a subway to New York. In those days the subways worked well at night. You didn't have to worry about waiting

and waiting. So I quit. The ones who stayed never did get their money.

B: How did you meet filmmaker Avery Willard?

M: Avery Willard. I met him when I was a "stitch bitch" at the dress shop on Bleeker. You probably heard of Colleen Duhurst? She was in an off-off-Broadway show called *The Eagle Has Two Heads* around the corner on 7th Avenue at the Actors' Playhouse. She wore this gown, circa 1867, in blue vellum and my boss made it. So I was at the

continued next page

theater and I met Avery's wife Tommy (Davidson). Avery had taken the photos of the stars in the show. Avery was an important photographer. He photographed Mae West, Louis Jordan, Peggy Lee, Andy Griffith, Marlena Deitrich, Anna Magnani, Lillian and Dorothy Gish.

B: So that's why he started making the films. He had experience as a photographer.

M: The films were done with an 8mm camera. And I met George Schroeders and we put together this underground movie in 1957 (*Speakeasy Queen*). Avery shot it. Billy Richards, did you ever hear of Billy Richards? She's been dead for years now. She'd been in silent films and really knew how to move her face. So she was wonderful. But she used to drink and she'd fall under the bar. (laughs gently) And she made beautiful wardrobe. Gorgeous. I met Billy Richards in Pittsburgh in 1953. She was living in a rooming house. It was all queens living in this rooming house. She was in the first two Ava-graph films. (*Speakeasy Queen*, 1957, and *Fashions of the Twenties*, 1958.)

B: Who came up with the idea of making the films?

M: Avery's wife invited me to their home, Halloween '55. "Come in drag," she said. "Come in drag." And I wore a black beaded dress from the '20's. And Avery, when he saw me, oh, did I get photographed. We did a lot of stills.

Avery was on 56th Street, three flights up (28 West 56th Street). It's a block that has a lot of photographers there. And all of a sudden he realized that I was just more than a stitch bitch. In the meantime he met George, a player piano. So the three of us cooked up the idea, the first Ava-graph film, *Speakeasy Queen*. It was mostly made at George's house on 12th Street. All together I was in about ten movies. Not all Ava-graph films, I did other movies, too. But, the Ava-graph were the only ones I had big parts. I did Ava-graph films from '57 to '67.

B: Why did Avery ask Harvey Lee to be in *The Last of the Worthingtons?* (1961) Harvey was living on the West Coast in San Francisco.

M: Yea, well, she'd come back from Frisco. How'd she get roped into that? Oh, she was so impossible. Oh, god, she couldn't screw on her earrings. I had to do it for her.

B: Was she too drunk, too upset, too confused? What?

M: She just wanted attention. She'd drive you nuts. She was such an ego maniac. She was a Leo. She said she'd sue Avery if she wasn't billed over me. Now she played the

mother and I was the young girl from the country who was really the star of the show. So Avery gave us co-billing. (laughs) Anyway, after that I didn't bother much with her.

B: Where were the films shown?

M: He showed them at his home. He could have maybe about 35 people for a screening. He showed them in bars, too. With only 8mm he couldn't show them in a regular theater. The projector wouldn't go that far and there was worry about getting raided.

B: For just showing a drag film?

M: Yes. One showing at the Ava-graph Studio, a little studio on 12th Street between 3rd and 4th Avenues (109 East 12th Street) did get raided in 1958. I was in jail for two days. I was there in drag selling the tickets, but the thing was finally thrown out of court. (At that time being in drag was illegal in New York.)

Minette is still full of stories. Her rich life is a treasury of tales and talent. No wonder she inspired Avery Willard's films and a book of her Reflections. Next year we'll be visiting her again for a field trip to photographer Avery Willard, who's living in a Veteran's retirement home in the Bronx. And though the drive may be long, Minette will fill the time with charming, theatrical tales.

We would like to thank Liz McGherity, Dan Nicoletta and Matt Wood for their cooperation in arranging this interview.

Ms Bob is a collector of gender related books, magazines and ephemera. She is always interested in comparing collections, buying, selling or trading. Several times a year she distributes a list of items she has available. You can contact her c/o LadyLike or <msbob@tgforum.com>. If there is any subject or person you'd be interested in seeing in "Flash Back," LadyLike's history column, please drop us a note and we will try to oblige.

Carol Kleinmaier is a founding member of Transgendered Nation. For over a decade she has been an activist for both gender and AIDS issues.



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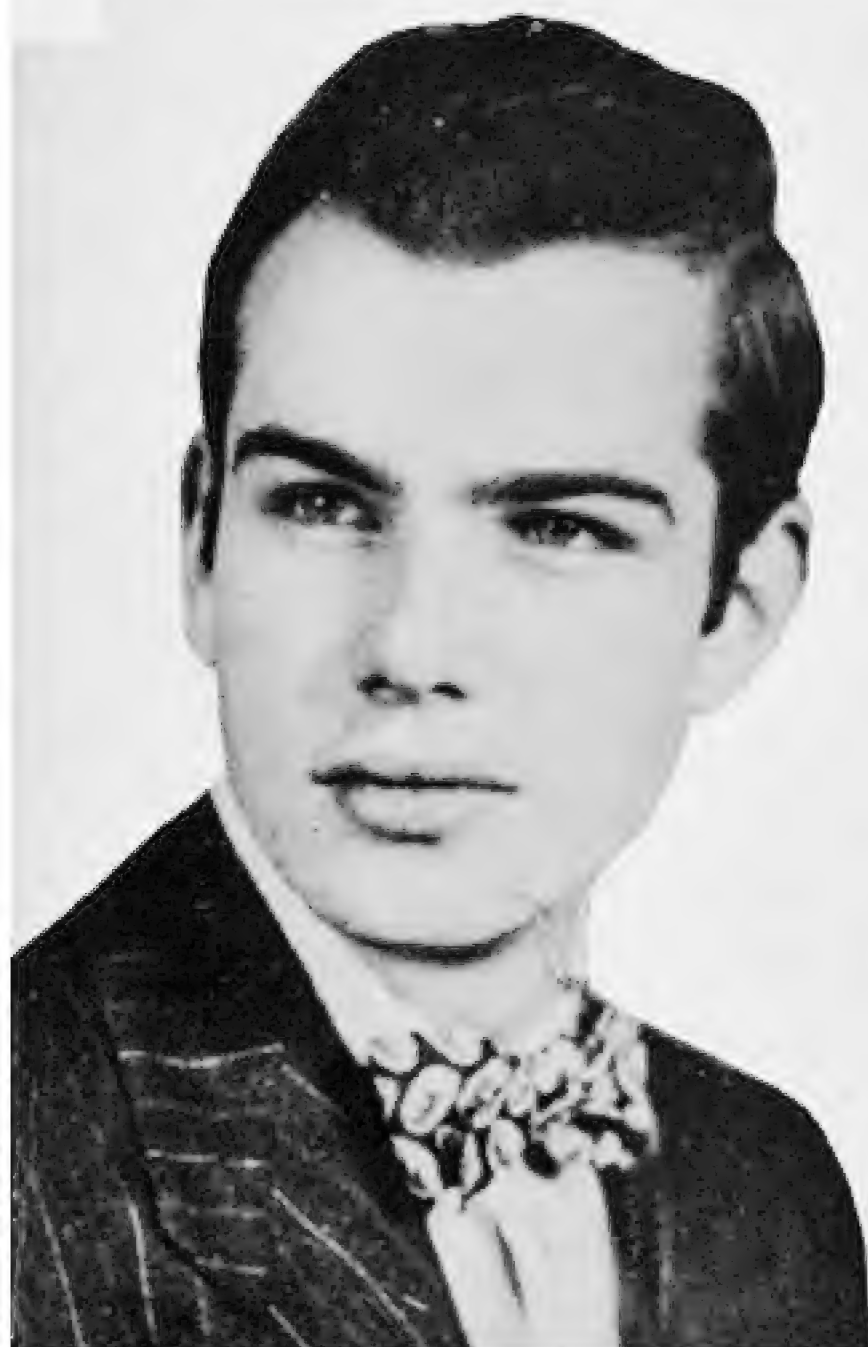
"I. Minette"

AN EXCLUSIVE FIRST PERSON STORY BY ONE OF AMERICA'S
FOREMOST FEMALE IMPERSONATORS!





From top to toe, Minette overlooks nothing in his role as a femme.



Presenting, in photos and words, the confessions of a professional stage transvestite. Some will be shocked, others impressed by the candor with which Minette bares his very soul.

I WAS CONCEIVED IN PARIS, born in New York City and raised in Boston. I made my debut in showbusiness at the age of three, appearing with my aunt, Edith Le Bec. My aunt had come to America as a teenager many years before, and had had a successful career in musicals, vaudeville, and burlesque. She taught me to do impressions of popular singers of the day; my first performance was an impression of Belle Baker's "All Of Me." Then followed impressions of such stars as Ruth Etting, Ethel Waters, Eddie Cantor. Another popular song was "River Stay Way From My Door" as Kate Smith, Helen Kane, and Mae West would sing it. I realize now what powers of concentration I must have had to be able to learn to do my act, and what great patience my aunt must have had to teach me these songs.

At the age of 6 I retired from burlesque to attend school. Soon I was back at work, but this time I was appearing in vaudville. I did a song and dance act, becoming the most popular "kiddie act" on the circuit. Was I proud when Gilda Grey, making a come back at the time, chose me to tour with her in a review on Kieth circuit. Gilda Grey was still the undisputed "Queen Of The Shimmie," and my name appeared in small letters at the bottom of the bill.

When I was 14 I was dealt quite a blow when a new law prohibited children under 16 to work on stage in Boston. I was tall for my age and decided to make a change. Becoming a nightclub crooner, I amazed myself more than my friends by working for several seasons in and around Boston as a vocalist with bands, one of which broadcast over a local radio station. However, I wasn't really happy with myself or my act. So, at the age of 16 I took a course in costume design. Though I was still working as a singer and making good money, I longed to get out of showbusiness and become a couturier.

As it turned out, there were no jobs at decent wages to be had without practical experience or a following. About this time, there became a great demand for female impersonators in Boston. Chris Scarlet, a dancer I'd known in vaudville who had become successful as an impersonator, gave me the idea of becoming a female impersonator. For the first time in years I felt fulfilled as an artist. I was able to express myself much better in gowns than I had been able to in trousers!

At first I worked in small clubs singing comedy and novelty numbers, getting better bookings. Then I was booked into the 181 Club in New York City (forerunner of the Club 82).

Having made quite a name for myself as an impersonator, I returned to Boston in 1951 to appear at the College Inn. This was Boston's most popular club, seating 500 in the lounge alone. On weekends crowds waited in line to get into the club. I had a good spot in the review and remained at the club until the Summer when Roxy King, "The King Of The Tassel Dancers" asked me to join his troupe in Providence. This was a better salary and better spot in the show, so I took the job. Later, another club owner in Providence asked me to star in my own review at his club, which I did. In a short time, we built up the business at the Jazz Room to a capacity audience.

After that engagement, I returned to the College Inn, but left later in the season to work weekend dates in and around Boston. I had quite a following and was especially known for my rendition of "Rose Of



Minette has made a study of all the different kinds of women and continues studying them in order to keep his act fresh. He actually has set up a filing system keyed to correlate many different facets of female behavior.





Washington Square," to which I had written my own parody. Whenever I walked into any of the clubs featuring female impersonators, I was always requested to sing my "theme song." I was now making more money working two or three nights a week than I had been in working at The College Inn.

This all came to an end on the 30th of Dec. 1951 when Archbishop Cushing wrote

an article condemning female impersonators. This man was so powerful that many of the clubs, including the College Inn closed voluntarily rather than try to buck the power of this important church man. He also condemned the exotic dancers and MC's who used "blue" material and so there was a great exodus of night club acts from Boston and the end of an era in "the hub."

Most of my friends left town for other parts of the country, but I remained to secure a booking at the

Log Cabin near Fonda, N.Y. where I worked until April 1952. The club wanted a dancer, so I brought along another impersonator friend of mine, Renee Roberts. The owner of the club met us at the railway station and drove us to the club in a terrible snowstorm. Also on the bill was the glamorous and beloved Lou Pierson, whose recent and untimely death saddened all who knew him. Business wasn't too good as the nearest town of any size was Amsterdam, which was 17 miles away and the main industry was the Mohawk Carpet Co. which was on strike. However, the club made enough money to keep out of the "red" and the food was excellent. We were on the main road and many truck drivers stopped in to eat during the day. Sometimes the owner would get us out of bed at 9 or 10 in the morning to act as hostesses, encouraging the drivers to buy drinks. With no beard, and I'd let my hair grow to shoulder

Minette varies garb from sexy, modern-day outfits to bustle dress so popular at the turn of the century.





He also has developed routines around the character of the flapper and various jet set types found in Europe.

length in Boston; it wasn't hard to look half way decent in a short time by putting on a little lipstick, blouse and slacks,

If business was slow at the Log Cabin, it was at a near standstill at the other clubs in the area. What nightclubbing the public was doing was coming our way. This became a point of irritation to other club owners and they made complaints to the police, saying that we had an indecent show or that the club remained open after hours. The police were putting more and more pressure on the club owner, however, I didn't give it much thought as I'd always presented a clean act, but I was more careful of my material. Nothing we did pleased the rival owners, and I remember saying to the owner: "If I clean up my act anymore, I'll be singing hymns." Finally the club was closed and I decided to return to New York City.

As I had practically no male

clothes, I arrived to visit with friends of mine in the Village as a female. My friends thought this very chic and persuaded me to remain in "drag," which I did for several months. It was a lot of fun living as a woman. I took the name of Rose Revere and made friends with dozens of people who never dreamed I wasn't "the real thing." This I didn't enjoy as I like to be honest about myself, but dared not in this case. I was regularly dating nice men, one of whom professed his love for me and went so far as to propose marriage.

In July I received a letter from Chris Scarlet offering me an opening with Rayleen's Review in Penn. At this time, Rayleen was well-known for his reviews. I went to work in his review on a two week contract, with two week's option and remained for 6 months.

In 1953 and 1954, I was working in Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit,

Bridgeport, and Wilmington.

In June 1953, I was booked into a Detroit club where I sang and MC'd a review which consisted of four female performers. The headliner was the fabulous Yvette Dare (dancer with a parrot to undress her). In Philadelphia 1954, I saw Yvette again who was appearing at a club there. This resulted in a tour of 8 months with Yvette Dare and her review. She was truly a fantastic and unique person and the entertainment world lost a great artist with her death in 1955.

About this time, my Mother died and I returned north to close my family home as my Father had died in 1952.

My next stop was Philadelphia to work a club that had closed the night before my arrival. I was lucky enough to find work in another club, but worked there only one night. When I came to work the following evening, I found that the club had burned to the ground.



That Spring and Summer were difficult for me as the law in Philadelphia was determined to keep female impersonators out of "The City of Brotherly Love."

I even worked in a carnival for a few weeks in the side show as Surpentina (dancing with a pair of boa constrictors) and doubling as Mme. Electra, the girl who defies death in the electric chair.

Then back to New York City where I took a position with a costumer, working in his Greenwich Village dress shop (for a year and a half). How wonderful to have a home after years of living out of a suitcase!

I was working on costumes for Coleen Dewhurst, who was appearing in "The Eagle Has Two Heads" at the Actor's Playhouse. The play was photographed by well-known theatrical photographer, Avery Willard. He gave a Halloween costume party, to which I came in "drag." Everyone was amazed

when they found out I wasn't a female at all. Avery was delighted and astonished when he found out who I was and kept saying "I must photograph you. You are one of the most convincing female impersonators I have ever seen." Needless to say, I won first prize and later Avery did photograph me, which led to my "rediscovery" and retirement from female impersonation.

I had met a clever actor, George Schroeders, who had an act with a player piano—"George and Nola." Since I was a child I have been a collector of old records and sheet music, and was able to give George the words to old songs that were useful to him. I introduced Avery to George, who needed new photographs. When the three of us got together, we decided to do a little movie short (Avery had his own movie equipment and was very interested in film work). So the three of us began filming "Speak-easy Queen" (very much like the

Although he started out in pants as a "burly" performer' Minette soon found he felt much more competent when



early movie makers did; making up the story as we went along). It was filmed in George's apartment, with me in the title role and George in dual roles—one of my leading men and a night club dancer (female), besides directing the film. I brought along famous impersonator, Billy Richards, to the filming one day and Avery put him in the film in a comedy role. Thus was the birth of Ava-Graph films — I gave the company its name—and me in a new medium of show business. After that I made several films for Ava-Graph, and was soon known as "The Sweetheart Of The Silver Screen." There will be more about Ava-Graph and our filming in articles by Mr. Willard for future issues of FEMALE MIMICS.

I returned to working clubs in and around New York City, mostly weekend dates.

I've come a long way since I was the "new red hot mama." Over the years my singing has gone from

loud to soft and from hot to cool. Since I've been back in New York I have added much to my record collection and I now own about 3,000 78 records and sheet music from the early 90's to the late 40's. My singing style has been influenced more by these singers of yesteryear than by the artists of the day.

As I play the piano and am able to accompany my own singing, it is possible to play small club rooms. It has been a year since I started working on my new act as a singing pianist. Working by myself has taught me so many new things to do with my voice that I never dreamed possible. So I keep learning and improving, which any true artist must do to feel really gratified in his heart. If I am not better next year that I am this year, then I have not used my time to its best advantage, but this promise I owe to myself and my public—Next year Minette will be even better! END



practising stage artistry in skirts. Today he's one of the top-ranking mimic-artistes in the entire country.



Passing of a part-time lady

Memorial for legendary drag queen Minette

BY STEPHEN HOLT

The death late last year of legendary drag performer Minette, 73, marks the passing of a colorful, epic chapter of pre-Stonewall gay history. A musicologist, collector, gay historian and activist, as well as drag performer, singer, pianist, lyricist, and member of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Minette lived alone in Brooklyn with her cat, Velvet. She died of natural causes, according to her friend, Adrian Milton, who discovered the body in Minette's Brooklyn apartment on Dec. 11. A memorial service is scheduled for Feb. 16.

Minette's career spanned more than six decades of all forms of show business, and she is credited with influencing a generation of gay playwrights and transvestite performers, including the late Charles Ludlam, Jackie Curtis, and Ethyl Eichelberger, as well as the drag theater troupes Hot Peaches and the Bloodlips.

"Minette was a great spirit," says Obie-winning actor Lola Pashalinski, an original Ridiculous member. "He was omnipresent in the early days of the company, always coming to rehearsals and performances. I remember him sitting at the piano in Mario Montez's loft in the '60s, smoking dozens of cigarettes and playing songs."

Many of Minette's friends referred to her using the masculine pronoun, but Minette, who wore drag or semi-drag continually, always used the feminine.

Born on Aug. 25, 1928, in the Bowery, Minette was given the first name Jacques (a name she never used as an adult). Her parents, both French nationals, were visiting the United States at the time.

"Her father, Jacques Joseph Minette, was a scene painter and her mother, Marguerite Monet, was a performer," says Milton. Raised in Boston, Minette was kicked out of school in the eighth grade, Milton says, for "nervousness," and began performing on the vaudeville stage with her mother. "She started doing drag at age 14, and then professionally when she was 16, at these drag clubs in Boston," says Milton.

Minette's life then began a rhythm of appearing in gay clubs in "tank towns" outside the big cities, and then "being ridden out of town on a rail," as she once described, when "Lily Law found out we were entertaining gentlemen on the side." She claimed to have escaped drag queen lynchings by the Klan in the 1940s when

she was performing in Kentucky and Tennessee.

Minette moved permanently to New York City in the early 1950s.

"His drag persona was as a chanteuse, a very glamorous woman of the '40s, rather than a movie star," says Pashalinski. "He was gorgeous and sang fabulously."

Minette was important, she continues, because "she reinforced Charles [Ludlam's] aesthetic. She was a creative, productive force who connected Charles and Ethyl to a great tradition of drag performing" from the days of vaudeville and burlesque to the present.

David Kaufman, a frequent writer on theater for the New York Times and author of the upcoming Ludlam biography, "Ridiculous," in which Minette figures prominently, describes Minette as "the [Ridiculous] Company mascot. He was a prince of the earth, a genuinely sweet, sincere man, and a great, great, mentor, especially to the younger drag queens and transvestites who came after him. He loved sharing history with people and bringing people together."

Minette contributed songs and lyrics to Ludlam's 1970 play "Turds in Hell," and appeared in the shows "Caprice" and "Taboo Tableaux," the latter a compilation

ARTS OBITUARY

of scenes that the company periodically performed as a fund-raiser.

Minette can also be heard, but not seen, singing the humorous "I Hate to See My Little Son Go Down," in the 1960s drag documentary "The Queen."

In 1979, Minette self-published her memoirs, "Recollections of a Part Time Lady," a slim, copiously illustrated volume reproduced on a photocopy machine.

Crystal Field, artistic director of Theater for the New City, says that Minette "was a man who loved history, music and the theater. He was truly one of us gypsies."

information

A memorial for Minette will be held Feb. 16 at 1 p.m. at the Theater for the New City, 155 First Ave. Films that include Minette will be shown.



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My Tripping-Out Rag 2:29	How Many Kids Did You Kill Today? 6:00
LBJ Don't Take My Man Away 3:20	Come To Me At Tea-Time
Revolutionary Blues 4:18	(Part Two) 2:57

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SOUND CURRENT MUSIC
(ASCAP)
Hollywood, California
&
TOP-SHELF MUSIC
(ASCAP)
New York City



MINETTE

has been in show business quite a while, having performed in Vaudeville with Gilda Gray, the Shimmy Queen, at a very young age.

performed as a Female Impersonator throughout the U.S.A., but, mostly in the East, in Clubs and Theatres, singing and dancing.

as Rag-Time Pianist at the Provincetown Playhouse, for Joe Franklin and his Memory Lane Flicks production, Greenwich Village, New York.

is known as 'The Sweetheart Of Anagraph Films', having been starred or featured in 9 productions, wherein Female Impersonators play male and female roles. A sort of Art-Nouveau-Kabuki-Troupe, American-Camp Style.

performs the vocal soundtrack of the worldwide Award-Winning flick, 'The Queen'.

has a Cameo Bit in the Brando-Burton starrer, 'Gandy'.

is now doing a Fashion Show in New York City, modeling Hopeton Morris' Rag Time Era and Far-Eastern Creations, while singing songs from this album, in a Mixed-Media format.

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SCINTILLATING CINEMA



New Impersonator Movies

(If you read "I, Minette," the confessions of one of America's foremost female impersonators, in our last issue, you already know the beginning of the following article. Minette kept her promise, and persuaded the eminent photographer, Avery Willard, to describe in his own words their mad-cap adventures during this filming of what may well become a landmark in cinematic history—female impersonator movies! — Editor)



THE STORY OF AVA-GRAPH by Avery Willard

Minette, well-known female impersonator, started it all . . . Ava-Graph, that is. To begin at the beginning: Minette introduced me to George Schroeders in Nov. 1957. George had an "act" called "George and Nola," Nola being a wonderful electrified pianola. George and Minette both collect old pianola rolls and 78 records, as well as costumes and other memorabilia. Together, they opened up a whole new world to me as I began to learn more about the music and people of yesteryear, especially the twenties, which held a special fascination for me. As long as I can remember I have been interested in movies and wanted to try my hand at making films.

"SPEAKEASY QUEEN" IS BORN

Soon, George, Minette and I had decided to do just a few feet of film featuring the two of them. This was the beginning of "Speakeasy Queen," a thirty minute film in color, introducing Minette as a female impersonator.

This is a story of a nightclub girl of the twenties who meets a handsome sheik. It is filmed in silent movie style, in two scenes—the speakeasy (George's livingroom) and the girl's boudoir (George's bedroom). We made up the story as we went along and the film actually has 6 people in it. George doubled as the leading man who "gets the gate" and the sexy nightclub dancer. Tom Lewis doubled as the nightclub "John" and ugly flower woman (using a makeup consisting of rubber pieces for the face.)

NEW TALENT IS RECRUITED

We started filming weekends and evenings in Jan., 1958, and were so pleased with the opening scene between Minette and George that we decided to make it into a "short," and began looking for other actors to bring more intrigue into the story. One evening a friend and I were having a drink in a bar when I spotted the perfect type for the rival leading man. That is how Geraldo Nunes "landed" in the film. Min-

ette brought the famous Billy Richards to a filming and I put Billy into the film as the rival nightclub girl. Billy had a friend, Kiva, who came along to the next filming and he appeared in one scene.

This was a hectic filming, trying to get schedules worked out, etc., but it was a lot of fun working on it. We used the materials we had—Minette brought original gowns of the twenties; George also owned gowns from the twenties. We put up a couple of flats in George's livingroom and that became the club; we used George's bedroom just as it was (perfect for the twenties); and if one thing didn't work, then we tried another.

Finally the film was finished and then came the job of editing, which I knew very little about. After it was edited. Minette and I got together and did the "credits," which are on a pianola roll and gives the film a unique opening. George directed the film and selected the pianola rolls to use for background music (on tape). There are no



titles, as the film tells it's own story.

OLD & NEW TALENTS ARE DEVELOPED

After "Speakeasy Queen" was finished I really had the "bug" and wanted to do another film, especially about the twenties. So we began filming "Fashions Of The Twenties."

About this time I had taken the photographs for an Off-Broadway production of "The Boy Friend" and I talked the producer into letting us use the stage and sets for this film. We also began looking for other female impersonators to model the wardrobe of the twenties. While we had many original creations of the period, there were a few things missing, so Billy Richards (who has been quite successful as a costume designer) began sewing for the film.

The credits for this film I made using a Paris fashion book of the twenties as a background and the models are introduced holding colorful boxes in front of their faces

with each name on a box. This film features: Minette; Billy Richards; George Schroeders; Terry Lane (from the Club 82); Alexis Martel; Tom Lewis; and David (as a boy). I think that Billy Richards is outstanding in both these films; he has such a wonderful sense of comedy and timing.

AVA-GRAPH TRIES ITS FIRST FULL LENGTH

Now I decided that I wanted to film a full length story, so Minette and I got together and talked about trying something in the "Gay 90's." Minette had some friends who owned a wonderful house in Brooklyn that was perfect for this film. So, in the heat of the Summer of 1959, AvaGraph went on location near Prospect Park, filming in the Geiger Mansion.

Minette and I started working on the costumes as well as the writing of the script, which was patterned to suit the actors available.

At this time the internationally known Harvey Lee was appearing

with the Jewel Box Revue in New York. I had seen Harvey on the stage and later met him, and was most impressed at how fabulous he was. In the thirties, Harvey appeared at the Richmond Club; Winchell wrote about him; and he appeared as a female impersonator in a Warner Brother's Vitaphone film, "The City Slicker." Harvey agreed to play Lady Iris Worthington in "The Last Of The Worthingtons."

ACTORS PLAY MALE OR FEMALE — OR BOTH

I had photographed a handsome actor in an Off-Broadway play, Edward Blessington, and he was cast as Gerald, sweetheart of Sweet Sue (Minette). An old friend of mine, Frederick Frink, veteran stage and film actor, was cast in the duo roles of Mother Maybelle (Sue's Mother) and the Worthington Butler. He is most convincing in both roles. Arthur Geiger, owner of the house, was a natural for the role of Detective Nosely. His performance is



"Fashions Of The Twenties — Hats

most impressive. Another friend of mine, Ta-Ta, had just returned from California to New York and was cast as the Cockney Worthington maid, and is very funny in the role. Tom Lewis returned to the screen to play Bertram, Lady Iris' son.

I literally "lost my mind" to the delight of Arthur Geiger and his Mother, filming in the attic, drawing room, library, bedrooms, halls, and the cellar of their home. How I loved their cellar; it had so much character!

You can imagine how difficult and uncomfortable it was for the actors in those period gowns and under hot lights emoting on those hot June, July and Aug. days and nights. Finally we were ready to "shoot" the big ballroom scene (party Lady Iris gives to introduce Sweet Sue to London society), and all our "extras" were called in. Some of the extras didn't show up, so we had another call and some of the actors appear as different characters in this same scene. This is when I decided to "get in the act" and

turned the camera over to Tom Lewis, and I arrived at the ball as Oscar Wild (since then I've done a "bit" in my films just as a famous Hollywood producer has).

The film was finished in 1960 and I had more film than I knew what to do with, and all those titles to do! It was actually another year before it was finished and had its premiere March 25, 1961. It is filmed in black and white (which lends an air of mystery), has an original score composed and played by a pianist, Hal Sykes; and it's running time is one hour and ten minutes. It is truly an "epic" and when I think about it today I'm amazed that it was ever finished.

After the "Worthingtons," Ava-Graph was inactive for a year except for a 15 minute short, "Magic Music Hall," filmed to show with "Worthingtons."

AVA-GRAPH GRADUATES TO COLOR

Hal Sykes was so impressed with our films that he wrote an original

screen play, "The Dead Sister's Secret," which we started filming again in the Summer, June 13, 1961.

For this film I needed backgrounds and costumes circa 1915. Once again Minette came to my rescue by introducing me to Frank Cianflone and George Reed, who had the "perfect house" (again in Brooklyn!) Frank and George moved to another location before we finished the film, so we have scenes shot in both houses. We filmed the indoor scenes until the beginning of August, at which time, one of my stars went to Europe and I went to California for a month. Then in October (when we should have been doing indoor scenes) we did our big out-of-door opening scene on an estate in Chappaqua, N. Y. This is a woodland scene where the villain, Ronald Von Ratt chases Lilly Lou through the woods.

"The Dead Sister's Secret" was filmed in color, and stars Minette (in the title role); Valerie Velour (A Vamp to end all vamps); and Ta-Ta (America's New Sweetheart).

New Impersonator Movies

(Continued from page 32)



It features Frederick Frink, who is funny as Pa Hornsby (he also directed the film); Paula Ginsberg (beautiful vamp and cast off sweetheart of Ronald's); Stuart Goodwin (Handsome Big Richard, who "never loses faith that his sweetheart, Hermione, is not dead"); and a wonderful new actor, D. D. Griffo, who plays "Ma Hornsby" like a real pro. D. D. Griffo selected the wonderful pianola score for this film.

Another outstanding performance in the film is by Valerie Velour, an actress with a wonderful sense of timing and a flair for playing comedy. Program note: After Valerie's husband, Mr. Siegel died in the twenties, she went into retirement. Ava-Graph finally persuaded her to make another film, and now you can see her in her greatest role in "The Dead Sister's Secret." Mr. Siegel had bought up and "canned" all of Valerie's films when they were married.

"The Dead Sisters Secret," a comedy-drama (about vamps vil-

lains, and foreclosure on the Hornsby Farm)—is fast moving and full of laughs and runs about 50 minutes. It had its premiere Aug. 14, 1962 and won many new fans for Ava-Graph.

RECENT AVA-GRAPH CREATIONS

Since "The Dead Sister's Secret," Ava-Graph has made two "shorts." "Variety" is a 12 minute musical featuring favorites of Ava-Graph and introduces a new talent, Roy Quattrocchi (his name is certainly too long for a marquee!) Roy also appears with Minette, Valerie Velour and other Ava-Graph favorites in "If Ads Were True," which is Ava-Graph's answer to the TV commercials. Both films are in "living color" and very amusing.

Currently Ava-Graph is filming "The Mad Twenties," which is composed of vignettes of the twenties showing some of the newer original gowns of the period Ava-Graph has acquired.

When we went "on location" to



New Impersonator Movies



New Impersonator Movies

film a sequence for Ava-Graph's "Mad Twenties" the results were hilarious. With bathing suits borrowed from the costume designer for "The Boy Friend," four actors, and equipment, we set out for Staten Island. One of my actors, Stuart Goodwin, drove us downtown to the S.I. ferry. It was a sunny, but cool fall day. On S.I. we drove to a secluded beach area and there before us was a rundown, large beach house that looked like one once owned by Marion Davies in California. The actors, as well as the producer, went wild filming something right out of a Max Sennett comedy. Occasionally a person or two would wander along the beach and wonder what was going on. It was what I call "dangerous fun," and I expected to be surrounded by crowds of people at any moment, having to talk our way out of a situation. Luck was with us. We used up all our film, packed up our fun bathing suits and silently faded away in the dusk. What a day . . . a day by the beautiful sea!

THE END

